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Taft, Angela, Hegarty, Kelsey, & Flood, Michael
(2001)

Are men and women equally violent to intimate partners?
Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 25(6), pp. 498-500.

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/103392/>

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<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-842X.2001.tb00311.x>

Abstract

Violence against women is a significant public health issue. One form of violence against women, intimate partner abuse or domestic violence, is prevalent in Australia. In this article, we summarise the main theoretical and methodological debates informing prevalence research in this area. We explain why studies finding equivalent victimisation and perpetration rates between the sexes are conceptually and methodologically flawed and why coercion and control are fundamental to the definition and measurement of partner abuse. We conclude that while male victims of partner abuse certainly exist, male victims of other forms of male violence are more prevalent. A focus on gendered risk of violence in public health policy should target male to male public violence and male to female intimate partner abuse.

ARE MEN AND WOMEN EQUALLY VIOLENT TO INTIMATE PARTNERS?

Angela Taft, Kelsey Hegarty and Michael Flood

Introduction

Domestic violence is a controversial area. The many other names for it - (intimate) partner abuse, woman abuse, wife abuse, spouse abuse, battering and family violence - reflect the many theoretical and conceptual backgrounds behind differing definitions of the problem. The concept always includes at least one form of abuse, usually physical violence, by one intimate partner against the other. A recent population study purported to show that Australian men and women were equally violent to intimate partners.¹ We discuss why this and other similar studies are both conceptually and methodologically flawed, in order to inform better public health policy and debate.

International bodies including the World Health Organisation have recognised that violence against women is a leading cause of health damage to women and children with major social and economic consequences. Australia has responded with a wide range of policy and program responses, making it an important focus of public health concern.²⁻⁴

Conceptual debates

There is considerable debate over differing definitions of domestic violence. Definitions range from physical violence only in current relationships to those including emotional abuse in past ones.⁵ Domestic violence/partner abuse should not be defined solely by the presence of violent behaviour, but by violent behaviour used to control or punish one partner and by an asymmetry in the violence. Several researchers of men who abuse female partners have conceptualised different forms of violence between partners. Neidig (1984) outlined two types of physical violence, “expressive” and “instrumental”, that occur in relationships and proposes that an individual could be located at any point between these two extremes. Expressive violence occurs as a result of escalating conflict between partners where it is easy to identify the precipitating event and both partners are involved in the escalation although not equally. Instrumental violence is the deliberate use of violence as a tool to punish or control the behaviour of the partner.⁶

Johnson (1995) also identifies different forms of violence. He argues that some families suffer from occasional outbursts of violence by either husbands or wives during conflicts (common couple violence), while other families are terrorised by systematic male violence (patriarchal terrorism). Still other families may experience both. Tolman (1995) suggests that with emotional abuse, conflicts in non-abusive relationships may be characterised at times by verbal aggression or withdrawal of affection on the part of either partner. He discriminates however, that where a man isolates his partner from friends, family and outside resources and demands subservience, he is more likely to use regular physical violence against her. ^{7, 8}

There are two popular but differing views in the current literature about the context, nature and extent of intimate partner abuse. Sociologists interested in family violence see the family as a site of conflict, reflecting broader conflict in society. Within families, adult partners are presumed to be equal in their power to abuse each other or the children. ⁹ By contrast, feminist and pro-feminist researchers of violence against women ¹⁰, view male to female aggression in relationships as often coercive, which reflects the patterns of male domination in most societies. Partner abuse is seen as more likely to occur in a context of unequal power relationships within the family, where social attitudes support male authority over female family members, women's unequal access to economic security and domestic violence as a private concern rather than a public issue. A new and useful ecological model, Figure 1 below, attempts to integrate the different explanatory concepts of partner abuse at differing levels (individual, couple, family or community and society) to explain abusive male behaviour. ¹¹

Insert model here.

Evidence that men and women are equally violent comes from studies using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and Headey et al's study typifies this approach. Hegarty and Roberts recently reviewed the definitions of domestic violence and consequent prevalence figures in Australian and overseas population and clinical studies in this journal. ⁵ They argued that studies which find that men and women are equally violent are commonly artefacts of studies using the CTS.

The CTS has been widely criticised for:

- measuring conflict tactics rather than coercive tactics
- omitting acts such as sexual abuse, stalking and choking
- omitting incidents after separation and divorce, which is a time of increased danger for women
- not eliciting information about the intensity, context, consequences or meaning of the action.^{10, 12}

This is the method adopted by Headey et al, who, with neither a justification nor definition of their concept of domestic violence, measured physically abusive acts only between women and men in current relationships. We know, both from the 1996 national Women's Safety Survey conducted by the ABS and clinical studies¹³, that surveys of currently partnered people overlook the greater numbers of women who have experienced abuse but have divorced or separated. This represented 42% of those who were abused by male intimate partners in the ABS study.¹⁴ Headey et al created dichotomised tables indicating 'no assault' or 'any assault' over the last twelve months. 'Any assault' included those who had experienced one violent act or those who had experienced six or more. The apparent gender equivalence in perpetration of violence documented in CTS studies can also be the result of the inclusion of minor incidents of violence, which may include acts of self defence or retaliation by female partners.¹³

From a health perspective, intimate partner abuse can be better understood as chronic behaviour that is characterised not by the episodes of physical violence which punctuate the relationship but by the emotional and psychological abuse that the perpetrator uses to maintain control over their partner. Furthermore, as most victims of partner abuse report, the physical violence is the least damaging abuse they suffer: it is the relentless psychological abuse that cripples and isolates them.¹⁵ Intimate partner abuse cannot be measured by any tool, which does not characterise the abuse as a form of coercion and control and include measures of at least physical and sexual abuse. Any measure needs to include frequency and severity and report these without conflating incidence figures into all or nothing.¹³

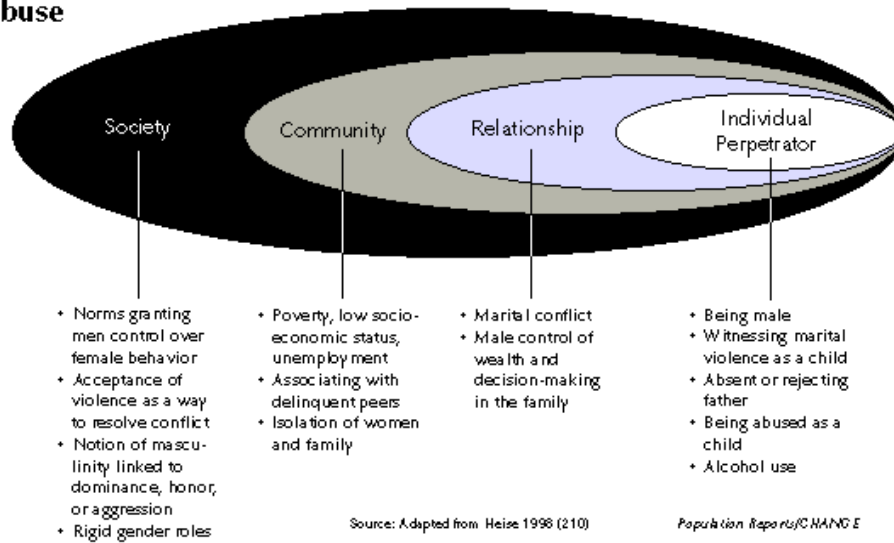
The claim that men and women are equally violent ignores a substantial body of conflicting evidence. Women are the majority of victims of domestic assaults both in Australia and overseas.¹⁶ They are the majority of Australian victims killed by partners.¹⁷ Prevalence

figures from Australian survey research using the Conflict Tactics Scale items shows a reasonably large proportion of victims of violence being male, although women are four times more likely to be victims of an episode of physical violence in intimate relationships.¹⁸ Australian police figures reveal that females were found to be over eight times more likely to report victimisation than males.¹⁶ Australian crime surveys show that women are the main reported victims of intimate violence. Larger numbers of women than men seek shelter in refuges in Australia and take out protection orders.¹⁹ Similarly, the state Domestic Violence phone ins conducted in Australia over the last few years found that the percentage of callers who were male victims ranged from 4% to 7.9%.²⁰ Researchers have also provided consistent evidence in the evaluation of men's behaviour change programs that men who use violence consistently under-report it.²¹ There is no empirical evidence that men are more likely than women to under-report to police, hospitals or to seek help.

If one examines the data from all agencies, e.g. police, courts, hospitals and general practice, which respond to victims, it is clear that while there are certainly male victims of intimate partner abuse, (at the hands of both male and female partners), the majority is female. A few women are victims of lesbian violence, as the ABS study indicated. Male victims of violence are far more frequently assaulted by other men.¹⁷

If our concern is genuinely the violence done to men, then resources for men are better targeted at male on male violence, such as that in prisons, in public places and in the workplace. Whilst male victims of domestic violence deserve recognition, sympathy and support just as female victims do, it is unnecessary to argue that men and women are equally violent for male victims to receive this. It is quite clear that Australian public health policy responses to violence should be gendered in focus and that the responses to intimate partner abuse are largely and appropriately targeted to female victims and their children.

Figure 1. Ecological Model of Factors Associated with Partner Abuse



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